

WHY? WHY? LENIN? STALIN?

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, 1900–1930
Second Edition

THEODORE
H. Von LAUE

CRITICAL PERIODS OF HISTORY



Why Lenin? Why Stalin?

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Second Edition

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*To the students and faculty
of the University of California, Riverside,
and,
with a heavier heart,
to Boris Nikolaevich Krasovskii*

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Why Lenin? ★ *Why Stalin?*

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Preface to the First Edition



WE EXIST AND SURVIVE by making judgments. In the big issues that shape the fate of men and nations our judgments are based on simplifications and generalizations, on "images." The present world of baffling complexities therefore demands the reduction of mazes which only experts can follow—and even they imperfectly—to simple patterns comprehensible to ordinary men and women. All people, particularly in a democracy, deal with and judge these issues, one way or the other. The choice before us then is not of simplicity or complexity but of good or bad, penetrating or misleading simplification. Generalizations guide public opinion, public opinion influences and sometimes determines government policy, and government policy holds the fatal trigger of war and peace, particularly when the subject is Russia and communism. Let our generalizations, therefore, be knowledgeable and just.

This essay offers a novel explanation of the rise of Lenin and Stalin. It attempts to view the emergence of Russian communism as an integral part of European and global history, treating it, as it should have been from the start, as a problem of comparative studies, not as an isolated phenomenon to be explained largely from Russian conditions alone. Its bent of argument thus runs counter to the tendency of some cultural anthropologists and their followers in sociology and political science to derive the causes of modern Russian development chiefly, if not exclusively, from internal factors. Without denying the importance

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of the latter this essay stresses the primacy of the external conditions, of the pressure of global power politics. Russia's leaders before and after 1917, so this story runs, tried to reshape Russian state and society—and human nature to boot—in order to make their country respected in a world where power, and power in many disguises, was trump.

This treatise, however, does not aim at a miniature likeness of modern Russian history (whatever, viewed objectively, that likeness is). It presents an image drawn in the manner of a sketch. A sketch, our experience of modern art shows, is a debatable vision of reality. Yet to the artist it accentuates just those features which are crucial. So with this essay of macro-history: It is a summary search for the best way of looking at a chain of momentous events in twentieth-century history. It wishes, by a few strokes of analysis, to set the proper perspectives, indicate the chief characteristics, and, above all, establish a sense of proportion which must guide us if we want to judge this all-important subject responsibly. The task requires that while we sketch the Russians we also scan ourselves. Portraying them we must, in one of the profiles of the subject, draw our own likeness in the same scale.

Sketching the Russian revolution is bound to be a controversial enterprise. Russian and Soviet studies are set, in the minds of most experts, into an unexamined and hidden net of basic assumptions about the course of modern Russian history. These assumptions are apt to be charged—and surcharged—with the tensions of past and current politics. The subject is alive with subtle furies; few western students (the author included) have remained immune to their siren call. Yet whatever the risks of disputation, the hidden assumptions must be brought into the open and tested by rational analysis. We easily spot the Marxist-Leninist doctrines underlying Soviet historiography, but we are purblind to the convictions on which we mount our own individual inquiries into Russian and Soviet affairs. Let this elusive background be examined; and let it be brought up to date with

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the help of the knowledge we have gained about the dilemmas of the underdeveloped countries!

May I express at this point my thanks to Professor Robert D. Cross of Columbia University for offering an opportunity to write an epilogue to my study of *Sergei Witte and the Industrialization of Russia, 1892-1903*. I am grateful also to the University of California, Riverside, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for granting the necessary leisure and material support, to the Russian Research Center at Harvard for its hospitality, and to my wife for scrutinizing every sentence of the text and patiently suffering the absentmindedness of a writing husband. Professor Arthur P. Mendel has vigorously contested my views of the problems confronting the tsarist regime; Mr. Robert C. Williams has thoughtfully commented on a number of specific and general points in the entire manuscript. While both have left no doubt that they are not responsible for any flaws, they have done their share to clarify the text. Thanks are also due to Mrs. Joan Kibbe, who has expertly typed the bulk of the manuscript, and to the editor, Mr. Stewart Richardson, who has seen it through the press.

THEODORE H. VON LAUE

West Dover, Vermont
August, 1963

Preface to the Second Edition



It has been said: Everybody his own historian, by which is meant that each one of us must fashion for himself his vision of the grand concourse between past and future on which we move. By the same logic it follows that each historian rewrite his histories when his vision has changed. And how our perspectives have changed in the past ten years!

In the late fifties, when the first edition of this volume was planned, it was still possible to agree with Arthur M. Schlesinger's assessment of the American condition written after the second world war: "Only the United States still has buffers between itself and the anxieties of our age, buffers of time, of distance, of natural wealth, of natural ingenuity, and of a stubborn tradition of hope." Anxiety, he said, "is not yet part of our lives—not of enough of our lives, anyway, to inform our national decisions." In those sunset years of immunity from the world's turmoil, it was possible to speak of the United States, and of western liberal tradition in general, as an untarnished model setting the pace and the standards for the rest of the world. Nothing indeed can alter the historical fact that it was so accepted, directly or indirectly, by men of affairs as well as by the run of intellectuals, even at home. For this reason the analysis set forth in this volume still holds true: the leaders of twentieth-century Russia aspired to imitate a self-confident, forward-looking America that seemed to embody the best of the western tradition.

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Now we have entered a new era. Anxiety, sometimes heightened to panic, is creeping ever more deeply into our decisions. The model of liberal-democratic America has been blackened, especially in the eyes of American youth—under fire, it would seem, still more from within the American experience than from without. The disillusionment has been swift and rather too spiteful perhaps. Whatever the motives, the prevailing mood now among American students is one of selfdoubt, confusion, and bitterness. When the traditional American promise of freedom, happiness, and justice for all is applied to an ever larger portion of mankind (as it will be in an ever shrinking world), it reveals many glaring inconsistencies and contradictions in American and, more generally, western practice. What then is freedom, happiness, and justice? What then is truth?

Under these circumstances the job of historian has become very difficult. He no longer finds commonly acceptable guidelines for his interpretations, no more common ground for his framework of meaningfulness. He too is left, at the end of his labors, with more questions than answers, with the now all-too-familiar shrug of the shoulder that implies: "I really don't know." To be sure, in the face of uncertainty a historian's competence does not entirely vanish; he can—and must—experiment with more suitable visions and versions of the future-bound past. All the same, he must come off his high horse of professional self-assurance and, like other men in their anxiety, humbly walk the spiked ground in his stocking feet.

The changes I have made represent an occasional amplification of the original text and, above all, a timely reconsideration of the frame of general assumptions into which we weave the facts of history.

Worcester, Massachusetts
November, 1970

In praise of Crises we might first say that passion is the mother of great things, real passion that is, bent on new and not merely the overthrow of the old. Unsuspected forces awaken in individuals and even heaven takes on a different hue. Whoever has got something to him can make himself felt because the barriers have been or are being trampled down.

—Jacob Burckhardt,
Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen

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Introduction



MORE THAN HALF a century has passed since November, 1917, when the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government (which the previous March had supplanted the Tsar and his ministers) and declared themselves masters of a new, a soviet Russia. Their coup was hardly taken seriously by the crowd on the boulevards of Petrograd or by newspaper readers, editorialists,* and even statesmen in the metropolises of the West; they were preoccupied with the threatened collapse of the Italian front in their gruelling war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Yet, the Bolshevik seizure of power has turned into one of the key events of the twentieth century. From a revolutionary regime desperately clinging to power, Soviet Russia has grown into a political colossus matched only by the United States. Our understanding has hardly been able to keep up with the rapidly widening impact of that revolution.

Looking at the rise of Bolshevik power as a critical period in history, one can measure its dimensions only in the largest contexts, the contexts that Lenin and the Bolsheviks themselves adopted for their justification: world revolution, a vast realign-

* On November 10, 1917, the *New York Times* observed editorially that the Bolsheviks were "pathetically ignorant and shallow men, political children without the slightest understanding of the vast forces they are playing with, men without a single qualification for prominence but the gift of gab, and if they could be left alone long enough their mere incompetence would destroy them, . . ."

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ment in the global balance of power. The framework, therefore, must be nothing less than the entire world and an ample period of time before and after the active revolutionary eruption. This essay therefore begins with the turn of the present century, when the world was still relatively at peace. It carries the narrative to the first Five Year Plan, the Great Depression, fascism and national socialism, Hitler and Stalin. These thirty-odd years, the span of but one generation, revealed in their unprecedented violence the first corollaries of the new globalism of human affairs. Mass politics, an ever-faster tempo of technological change, and the intensive interaction between Europeans and non-Europeans, "civilized" and "underdeveloped," combined to produce a more explosive instability than had ever arisen in all the past millenia of human existence. The Bolshevik revolution is one of the blast furnaces of the terrifying transformations suddenly sprung on an unprepared West during those years.

The Revolution if one looks closely was transacted on two separate stages: Russia and the global world. Obviously the Bolshevik Revolution—or rather, the entire period from 1900 to 1930—was first of all a crisis of the peoples of Russia, above all the Great Russians and the Ukrainians, but also for the many other nationalities and ethnic groups that inhabit the vast spaces of northern Asia between central Europe and the Sea of Okhotsk. They passed through a social and political cataclysm unprecedented in Russian history since the Time of Troubles early in the seventeenth century.

The ordeal of modern Russia has been in the making for many years, even before 1900. Nor did it end with the Five Year Plans of Stalin. In some ways it continues, diminished yet unresolved, to the present. For, as his essay intends to show, the internal revolution revolved around two parallel long-range necessities. On the one hand, the people of Russia and their government, and also the unprivileged and the privileged strata of society, had to be more effectively related to each other than had been customary—or possible—under the tsars. In this respect the Russian Revolution followed, however vaguely, in the

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wake of the French Revolution. On the other hand, both Russian society and government, privileged and unprivileged, had to undergo a drastic process of westernization, of catching up to the social, economic, and political efficiency of Russia's western neighbors especially Germany (a process enforced in the last analysis, from without, by the relentless pressure of power politics). In this sense the Russian Revolution established a new category, the revolution of the underdeveloped countries. Seen from this second point of view, the "classic" events of the Russian Revolution and civil war were but surface phenomena. Underneath the travail of revolution and counterrevolution that broke over a bewildered and driven people, of terror and counter terror, the deeper necessity took its course. Not always clearly expressed in the bloody scuffles, it aimed at the conversion of Russian state and society to modern industrialism. Both of these internal revolutions are hardly completed at present. A gulf still separates the regime from the people, and the unnatural harness of the "new Soviet man" imposed by the Communist party cruelly chafes against native spontaneity and tradition.

The shifting battles for the modernization of Russia were fought, as we have learned to our sorrow, under the ever-brighter limelights of the second stage, the global world. In many ways, the trials of Russia from 1900 to 1930 anticipated the agonies of other peoples on the fringes of Europe, in Asia, Africa, or even Latin America, who awoke to political ambition and struggled for self-assertion under the western impact. The Russian state, the weakest of the European masters, was at the same time the strongest among the underdeveloped—part imperialist, part dependent on the West. In terms of cultural preparedness and ambitions of power, it bridged the gap between the two basic categories of the global community.

During the climactic battles of the first World War, when the West—England, France, Germany, and the United States—was desperately absorbed in its own affairs and least capable of meeting the novel challenge Lenin established an emotional and political link between Russia and all the backward countries

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(most of them not yet in existence or aware of their condition) in the name of a superior world order. Warring against inferiority in their own country, the Bolsheviks proclaimed themselves leaders in the mounting antiwestern revolt, adopting at a shriller pitch the messianic presumption of universality so characteristic of the western elite. Yet strong as they have waxed in the process, they have hardly been able to resolve the crucial problem of how the advanced western urban-industrial civilization, which relies on the spontaneity of its citizens, can organically be fused with native pre-industrial habits and institutions.

Thus, roughly, run the contents of this essay. The argument prescribes that the story start with the global periphery before advancing to the Russian center.

I

THE SETTING: EUROPE AND THE WORLD



THE MOST conspicuous fact about the global world at the turn of the century was the unquestioned supremacy of Europe, specifically western Europe and, within that select company, Great Britain. The United States also loomed increasingly large in what came to be considered "the West," and for the same reasons that had given Britain its head start, although it did not yet occupy the position which it inherited after the first World War. Whatever the order of rank in the West—and it was a matter of dispute—the chief European powers jointly were the overlords of the globe.

The early years of the twentieth century marked the climax of a long process of European expansion. By 1914 all (or practically all) parts of the non-European world had fallen under the sway of Europe. Only the American hemisphere, westernized earlier than the other continents, was off limits, except for the restless ambition of the United States. The rest of the non-European world was fair game. Africa, except for Abyssinia, was carved up. Asia was taken over through outright occupation, the allocation of spheres of influences, or, more indirectly, through the subversion of native authority. In China, for instance, the Manchu dynasty was overthrown by westernized Chinese because it had not been able to prevent the despoliation of the country by the foreigners. Considerable portions of territory had already been severed from the Chinese Empire, and its sovereignty over what was left was severely limited. Southeast Asia had long been ruled more directly by the French, Dutch, or English; the English were the masters